



## Hospitality evangelism

In *Your Church Can Grow* (p. 81), Peter Wagner sets forth the following hypothesis: *"The effectiveness of the Christian's role as a witness for Church growth decreases with that person's maturity in Christ."* This phenomenon is due mainly to the fact that as a Christian matures in Christ, he becomes more and more involved in the church. His free time is quickly filled with Christian activities such as worship services, prayer meetings, Bible studies, Sunday school, committee meetings and church socials. His non-Christian friends are either converted or he gradually loses contact with them as their interests take them in different directions.

As a result evangelistic programs based on members inviting their friends often fail. They fail not because of poor planning, or poor scheduling, or poor programming, but rather because members have too few non-Christian contacts to invite.

On the other hand, new converts are more effective as witnesses for church growth, because they have more contacts with non-Christians. Yet the contacts that they have are quickly lost and must be cultivated as soon as possible. Often the new convert is not as effective as he could be, because he does not think he is ready to effectively share the gospel. He may postpone witnessing until he has "learned more about the Bible." By the time he has learned how to present the gospel (if he ever does), he no longer has the contacts with non-Christians that he once had.

Hospitality evangelism is aimed at helping the more mature Christian develop contacts with non-Christians and at helping the new convert witness effectively to the contacts which he already has.

### **Hospitality evangelism: What is it?**

The New Testament word which is translated "hospitality" is a combination of two words which mean "love" and "stranger." Hospitality is "love of stranger."

Hospitality evangelism, then, is a means of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ through love of strangers. More specifically, it refers to welcoming others into our homes so that they may see, hear and experience Christ's love for strangers.

The context of hospitality is extremely appropriate for sharing the gospel, because the good news which we proclaim is that God has been hospitable to us through his Son Jesus Christ. Christ's death and resurrection make it possible for man to enter into God's presence and experience his forgiveness, love and hospitality. God truly loves strangers.

Your various contacts in your neighborhood, at work, and in clubs and organizations can be placed in one of three groups:

1. those whom you do not know (surprisingly most people do not know 50 percent or more of the people in their neighborhood);
2. those whom you know by name and can talk to about the weather; and
3. those with whom you have a fairly close, comfortable relationship.

Hospitality evangelism is a process by which we get to know people and develop trusting, loving relationships in order to be able to present the gospel to them in a context of affection and openness.

The purpose of hospitality evangelism is for people to come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The greatest inherent problem in hospitality evangelism is seeing friendship as an end in

itself. You must not be satisfied with making friends for yourself. Your purpose must be to help your friends become friends of Jesus.

Do you have friends to whom you have never presented your testimony and the gospel of Christ? Write down five names today and begin to pray for their salvation. Decide now to share what Jesus means to you with these individuals within the next two weeks.

### **Hospitality evangelism: Why do it?**

There is a very clear biblical basis for practicing hospitality evangelism. Hospitality is one of the qualifications of a leader in Christ's church (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8). The significance of hospitality is obvious when we see that it is listed with qualifications such as *"above reproach, husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable."*

Not only leaders, but all believers, are commanded to be hospitable (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9). Why is it so important to the Lord that you be hospitable? Because you represent a hospitable God. When God commanded the Israelites to be hospitable (love strangers), the reason he gave was *"for you were strangers in Egypt. I am the Lord your God"* (Leviticus 19:34). That last sentence is shorthand for *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"* (Exodus 20:2). God had shown hospitality to them when they were strangers, and he called them to do likewise. If you are a believer, you were a *"stranger"* (Ephesians 2:12); but God has *"delivered (you) from the domain of darkness, and transferred (you) to the kingdom of his beloved Son"* (Colossians 1:13).

When Jesus cried out *"It is finished!"* (John 19:30), *"the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom"* (Mark 15:38). This began a great open house. God now welcomes us to continually come *"with confidence"* into his presence (Hebrews 4:16) in order to experience his love and hospitality. God calls us to be hospitable because he was first hospitable to us.

Hospitality is so important to God that his very purpose of redemption is often described in terms of hospitality. Once all sin has been removed, the kingdom of Christ will be finally and fully ushered in and *"In that day each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree, declares the Lord Almighty"* (Zechariah 3:10). That coming kingdom has dawned upon us with the resurrection of Christ. The coming age of hospitality has invaded this present evil age through the coming of the Holy Spirit. In a very real way when you have people into your home or welcome them at your church with the love of Jesus, it is a taste of heaven.

The kingdom of God is described as a banquet (Luke 13:29-30; 14:15-24; Revelation 19:9) and when the Lord returns *"he will gird himself to serve"*, and will show hospitality to us, his guests (Luke 12:37).

In God's plan for bringing people into his eternal home, the believer's hospitality plays a significant role. After the Day of Pentecost, Christians were meeting in homes for teaching, fellowship, worship and prayer. They *"ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God..."* (Acts 2:46-47). These believers were sharing the Father's hospitality with one another and things were happening. *"The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved"* (Acts 2:47b).

Evidently believers were inviting their friends, who then heard the gospel in the context of love and hospitality. This is John 13:35 hospitality evangelism. Jesus says, *"Love one another, even as I have loved you... By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:34-35). The unbelievers saw the power of the gospel in the way the early Christians loved one another, and they wanted to be loved by that great love that flows from our Savior through us.

The apostle Paul — though often thought of primarily as a travelling missionary — also practiced hospitality evangelism. While he was held captive in Rome, he lived in a rented home *"and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered"* (Acts 28:30-31). Even if you are a shut-in God will

bring the mission field into your home, if you commit yourself to share our hospitable Lord with others.

Hospitality is an important means of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. Throughout the New Testament there is evidence that missionaries were welcomed into the homes of believers in order to reduce the cost of travel and to be strengthened in body and spirit.

### **Hospitality evangelism: Does it work?**

The biblical basis for hospitality evangelism is the only reason we need, but it is not the only reason that exists. There are benefits.

It is effective evangelism. In less than six years, over 300 people heard the gospel in the context of our home. During three years time more than fifty of our unchurched friends visited the church we attended as a result of the ministry of hospitality the Lord gave us. Twelve of those fifty are now regular attenders. And during the total six years of practicing hospitality approximately forty people professed faith in Jesus Christ and are now active members of various churches. But this is only the beginning of a chain reaction set off and continued by the Holy Spirit. These converts have been used to bring the gospel to countless others through hospitality. Many have been saved and have continued the sounding forth of the good news.

It is an effective ministry of love. What an exciting and faith-building experience it will be for you to watch Jesus love strangers through you. As you admit your own inability to be hospitable and depend upon the Holy Spirit, you will be excited to see how loving you can be.

One night we prayed that God would show us how to love a lonely elderly couple on our block. The next day I had all but forgotten them, but my two daughters (Kristi 8, Kim 7 at the time) had not. They picked some flowers, made a bouquet and took it to this couple. This started a relationship in which Christ poured out his love abundantly and led to sharing the gospel.

It is an effective way to unify and disciple your family. Hospitality evangelism is a family project. A sovereign Lord has placed you and your family in your neighborhood and given you contacts at work and school for a purpose. You have a mission field. Family devotions take on a new dimension as we pray for our neighbors, plan a neighborhood potluck and make homemade invitations for an open house. As a family we begin to see the Lordship of Christ in all of life. The way we love one another, mow our lawn, play with other children is a testimony to unbelievers. Discipling one another in this mission oriented context brings real unity of spirit and purpose.

### **Hospitality evangelism: How do it?**

Hospitality is not just another optional method of evangelism. As we have seen, all Christians are commanded to be hospitable in response to God's hospitality. But God does not require one specific way of practicing hospitality. God has made each of us different and put us in different neighborhoods and work and school situations. He commands us to be hospitable and then to depend upon him for wisdom, guidance and opportunities to express that hospitality. Be wise and creative. Brainstorm with your family and Christian friends how you can best manifest God's hospitality to others.

Our family has found that in a neighborhood where we do not know many people, a neighborhood open house — in which we hand deliver invitations — is a very effective way to begin. Then having several couples in for dessert or a potluck can further the relationship. Pray that God will give you wisdom as to how to follow up with your friends. Invite them to special church events.

We have found it helpful to join with other believers in this ministry. We encourage one another and support each other with prayer and other help. As God saves people, involve these new converts with you since they will have many contacts with unbelievers.

More important than the actual procedures of hospitality evangelism is the perspective of hospitality evangelism. You may not see the fruit of your labors. You may experience various forms

of persecution. When this occurs the proper perspective is the key. Your perspective must be that you are doing your deeds of hospitality to and for Jesus. You have a unique opportunity to minister to your Savior.

When you have this perspective, you cannot be disappointed or discouraged. Pray that God will fill you with his hospitality, his love of strangers. Then step out in faith and open your home to others and remember the words of Jesus,

*"Come, you who are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For ... I was a stranger, and you invited me in; ... Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me."*

(Matthew 25:34-35, 40)

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